

Illegal immigrant patient finds shelter after all

Houston-area programs come to his rescue after UTMB offers to send him back to Mexico

By Harvey Rice | December 23, 2011 | Updated: December 23, 2011 11:51pm

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Brandi Valderrama kisses her husband, Francisco Martinez, as he holds their 6-month-old son.

GALVESTON — Two months ago **Francisco Martinez** feared the **University of Texas Medical Branch** would ship him back to Mexico with a broken back and an uncertain fate because he is undocumented. Instead of going to Mexico, three days before Christmas he moved from his hospital bed at UTMB into temporary housing in Houston with his family.

Martinez, 37, fell off a ladder while working on the roof of a Bacliff bait shop where he was employed, injuring his spine. The bait shop didn't offer workers' compensation, had no insurance and he didn't qualify for emergency Medicaid. UTMB doctors saved his life, but afterward UTMB officials offered to fly him to Mexico to avoid paying for his care. Martinez, who was uncertain if he would be able to get the months of rehabilitation he needed in Mexico, refused to accept an offer that would split him from his wife and 6-month-old son.

After Gulf Coast Interfaith intervened on his behalf in October, UTMB continued to provide medical care while the Jesse Tree and other social service agencies tried to find a place for him and his family where he could continue rehabilitation.

With assistance from Casa Juan Diego in Houston, Martinez and his family were able to move into their temporary residence Thursday.

Martinez's wife, **Brandi Valderrama**, 35, said it was like a Christmas gift. "It was a huge, huge blessing," Valderrama said.

"I'm happy," Martinez said. "Thank you, God, that I could get out of the hospital and have a house to go to."

Joe Compian, an advocate for Jesse Tree, coordinated assistance from individuals, churches and agencies. "We have a very generous faith community," Compian said. "People who actually live their faith through their actions."

UTMB confirmed that Martinez was discharged on Thursday, but declined to discuss his case. Compian said UTMB, at his request, is providing 30 days of medicines and hospital supplies, including diapers and catheters, a hospital bed and a wheelchair.

"After the unenlightened fashion in which they had treated Mr. Martinez with this offer to send him back to Mexico, UTMB was very much involved in this effort to assist Mr. Martinez and his family during this crisis in their lives," Compian said.

Compian said that planning will begin after the new year on how to care for Martinez after the equipment goes back to UTMB and the supplies run out in 30 days. He said several charities are likely to provide assistance.

Federal and state governments have no process for dealing with health care for the millions of illegal immigrants living and working in the United States. As a result, hospitals like UTMB across the country find themselves saddled with millions in medical care for undocumented immigrants who end up in the hospital, usually with life-threatening conditions.

Grady Hospital in Atlanta, for example, was spending \$4 million a month in 2009 to provide dialysis for 60 undocumented patients. Ten who agreed were sent back to their home countries.

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